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ABSTRACT

The Truancy Diversion Program began as a community focus on the problem of local students who did not complete their high school education. Representatives of local social and court services, the schools, and the Pittsburg State University Family Counseling Training Problem worked to develop a united effort to deal with children at risk of being chronically truant and eventually dropping out. The Program maintains that changes in behavior and attitude must occur not only in the truant but in the parents and other school-age children in the family to which the student belongs. Therefore, students participate in the program with their families. meeting at first with not only school representatives and family therapists, but also with representatives of the local courts. All parties sign a diversion agreement. Agency representatives are kept informed by the family regarding it progress in the program. Family therapy conducted by master-level therapists in the Pittsburg State counseling program treats underlying problems associated with truancy, dealing not only with the truant child, but with his/her parents and school-age siblings. In the majority of the cases observed, school attendance was markedly improved or at least satisfactory, grades improved, and no further interventions were needed for the truant child (and his/her siblings) to fulfill the statutory education requirement. (CC)

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A FAMILY SYSTEMS APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF TRUANCY

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The Truancy Diversion Program described in this paper began as a result of a community wide effort to improve the quality of life in a small midwestern town. In 1986 a group of interested community leaders that included physicians, judges, business persons, ministers, local social service workers and public school and university educators met to determine the problems and needs of the community and to propose ways of alleviating them. This group became known as the Well Community Council. Out of this program task forces were developed to deal with the community's most pressing needs. The model used in developing the Well Community Council was systemic in nature, focused on problem solving, and utilized the resources and talents of the entire local community

Need for the Program

One of the major problems that the Well Community Council selected to focus on was the drop out of students without completing a high school education. Upon further study it was determined that many of those children who dropped out of high school had records of chronic truancy dating back to middle school and even upper elementary school. It was also noted that there appeared to be a pattern of truancy and subsequent dropping out of school that affected several children in the same family. All community agencies that dealt with the truancy problem felt that even though they were trying hard to fulfill their roles effectively they were not being very successful. With this in mind representatives of the county attorney's office, the public schools, the court services, the social service office and the Pittsburg State University Family Counseling Training Program met together to explore the possibility of developing a united effort to deal with children who were at risk of becoming truant and eventually dropping out of school.

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Description of the Program

The result of this meeting was the development of a document describing the roles of each agency in working with students and their parents that were truant as defined by Kansas law (Appendix A). From these role definitions each agency could identify its contribution to the work with students who were truant. Agency staff could also see areas where there was lack of service; duplication of effort; and confusing, unclear communication among agencies and with the families. In addition it became very clear that the lack of effective communication among helping agencies could lead to gross manipulation of the system which lead in turn to over reaction (sending students who were truant to the state mental hospital for an evaluation) in some cases and no action at all in other cases. From these meetings the agencies involved developed a set of guiding principles that we could all agree to. We believe that early intervention is a key to effective treatment. We believe that referral for inpatient evaluation and treatment should be used as a last resort measure since this intervention stigmatized the teen by giving him/her a medical record of psychiatric diagnosis and inpatient treatment. We wanted to impact this negative outcome, to prevent its occurrence if at all possible by providing an alternative treatment that would not remove the teenager form his/her family environment. And, we wanted to facilitate changes in attitudes and behavior, not just of the truant, but of parents and other school-age children in the family system to which the child belonged.

Next a set of general procedures and operational guidelines was developed that would be respectful of the efforts of all parties including the parents (or guardians) of the students involved in truancy (Apendix A). These general procedures have remained virtually unchanged during the seven years that the project has been in operation. They are as follows:

1. Students who have missed school for unexcused reasons and are near the Kansas statutory limit are interviewed concerning their reasons for missing school. Every effort is made to identify and remedy problems at this stage; however, if the student continues to miss school the parents are notified and invited to school for a conference. If the child continues to miss school to the point of statutory truancy the designated school official immediately reports this to the county attorney's office.

2. A hearing is then promptly held at the local district court which is attended by the student, his/her parents, his/her attorney, the county attorney (or deputy), the court services officer, the designated school official and the judge to determine

truancy.

3. If truancy is determined the parent (or guardian) is given the option of having the student sent to an inpatient agency for diagnostic assessment, placed in a foster home, or left in the home and referred to the truancy diversion project.

4. If the family chooses the diversion project a meeting is then arranged with the student, his/her family including siblings and significant others who can offer him/her support, the court services officer, the county attorney (or deputy), school officials, the Director of the Family Therapy Training Program at Pittsburg State University and the family therapists. At this meeting a diversion agreement (Appendix B) is signed by all parties and the program of family counseling is begun. In some instances, other adjunctive services such as tutoring and social skills training is also recommended and provided. No permanent court record is retained after the diversion period has been completed successfully.

This meeting attended by all parties involved in the truancy proceedings is an extremely important first step in empowering parents to deal with their children, the school, and the courts in a more positive and cooperative way. A solution based format is used which focuses on problem solving, cooperation, and mutual respect. The goal of this meeting is to find common ground among all in attendance (or at least all of the adults) in order to diffuse feelings of hostility, anxiety, and hopelessness that are often present. Its outcome is to align the entire community with the parents toward the goal of encouraging the student to stay in school. Educational, social, and emotional objectives for the student who is truant are discussed. The student's cooperation is enlisted although not always obtained. The main focus of the meeting, however, is to work with the family and the entire support system in order that they solve the problem of educating the student to his/her potential and in the process eliminating truancy. This session usually is scheduled for one to one and one-half hours.

After all parties sign the diversion agreement the agency representatives leave and the family therapy session begins. These representatives will be kept informed by the family as to its progress in the program. No further meetings are held with the entire group unless the student continues to miss school or is extremely disruptive or uncooperative.

Description of Therapy

Family therapy is utilized to treat the underlying problems associated with truancy in addition to the overt behavior itself. In

addition there is a thorough review of the child's educational and psychological record which may lead to individual tutoring and social skills group work in addition to the family therapy. From the first session the focus of therapy is shifted from "child-problem" centered to "family-solution" centered in order to facilitate changes, not only, in the student who was truant, but also, in his/her parents and other school age children in the family system. The family therapy is conducted by masters level therapists who are involved in advanced supervision of their practice of family therapy. The frequency of sessions is every other week for one to one and one-half hours. The therapy is observed through a one-way mirror by the supervisor and a team of other therapists-in-supervision. The supervision team participates actively in therapy process by calling in interventions and comments by telephone during the session, by discussing the case during a pre-therapy planning session and by discussing hypotheses and homework during a break in the therapy session after three quarters of an hour. Families are seen from four to twenty sessions with an average length of nine times.

Discussion of Outcomes

At the end of June 1993 the program has worked with twenty-nine families that had one or more members who were truant. Sixty-seven percent of the children who were truant were girls and thirty-three percent were boys. The truants ranged in grade from fifth to twelfth grade, with the mode being referrals from the ninth grade.

Thirty-nine percent of the children who were truant came with intact families, twenty-two percent were from blended families, and thirty-nine percent lived with single parents. Both lower socioeconomic and middle-class families were included in the families referred to the program.

Although this project was not initially designed as a research project it was important to address its success and also its impact on the community. Of the twenty-nine students that were referred to the program eighty-nine percent finished the school year in which they were referred. School attendance was noted to be markably improved in forty-three percent of the cases, satisfactory in thirty-nine percent, and unsatisfactory or worse in seventeen percent as compared to attendance before referral to the program. Grades were noted to be improved in seventy three percent of the students, marginally improved in fourteen percent; unchanged in four percent, and lower in nine percent. There is a

continuing, long-term follow-up of the students and their families who have participated in the program. Eighty-five percent of these students have never required any institutionalization of any kind. In seventy-three percent of the cases no further interventions were needed in order for the families and their children (including the one adjudged truant) to fulfil the statutory requirement of staying in school to age sixteen. Six of our former referrals have graduated from high school and four are either enrolled in college or in technical school.

Results of the Program

During the years that we have been working with the families of truant students they have taught us a great deal. We had no confidence in approaches to truancy that made the child or adolescent the only "identified patient" and ignored the family's problems and needs that we believed were the origin of the school refusal.

We have hypothesized in our work with families of children who are truant that truancy is, in large part, a result of attitudes learned in the home, from parents. Attitudes of devaluation of academic learning, of authority figures, and of traditional social values prevailed in the families that we worked with. These attitudes lead to strategies on the part of these families that subverted the potency of the school experience as a powerful social learning as well as educational institution. In nearly all of our families the parent had toxic experiences in school and found it difficult for him/her, despite good intent, to model the behaviors and attitudes that would promote children's success.

From the very first meeting there is an emphasis in our program on school, family, law enforcement, and counseling agency working together. This is an efficient use of resources. It also models cooperation for the student who is at a point of social and emotional crisis, lacks a life plan and appropriate goals, and is alienated in relation to his/her social world. We believe that the establishment of a new context of relationships, not only for the family members relating to each other, but for the family members relating to systems outside the family such as the school, the legal system and helping agencies in the community creates a dynamic and positive framework in which to operate.

An understanding of the problem of truancy from a family system's perspective gives at the same time the key to a solution. Truancy in many families we have worked with can be seen as a

kind of solution by the family for their developmental and/or structural inadequacies. We observed that many families needed the truancy of one member to maintain homeostasis within the family and that once this child left school for good another child would take his/her place as the truant. Thus the problem came to the assistance of the whole family in the form of working together to maintain itself as a functioning unit without having to face the more basic problems of alcoholism, abuse, lack of intimacy etc. that might destroy even the basis of the family.

With this understanding we came to utilize the function of the symptom of truancy as well as the timing of this symptom occurring within a family to construct our interventions. We found that when the function of the symptom was understood, the changes that needed to be facilitated in family relationships became more obvious. The problem of truancy arises for many families at a child's adolescence because the family is unable to accomplish the typical transitions in relationships which are needed in the life of a family with teenage children. School refusal can thus be seen as a kind of maturational crisis within the family. The family members can avoid facing developmental issues such as separation, individuation, launching young adults into lives independent of the family of origin, and the probable stability of the marital relationship after children are raised by placing the adolescent in a role which inhibits maturation and so maintains the truant behavior

During the course of family therapy we are less concerned about the child's returning to school than we are about facilitating the needed changes in family structure, in power relationships within the family, and in the family's ability to meet maturational demands. Often, in fact, school attendance began to improve after the initial diversion hearing. One of the most sustaining therapeutic interventions was to positively connote the steps that the family was taking which lead to better school attendance. Doing more of what is already working is a new concept of families who have little or no concept of success.

The family's characteristics modes of coping can be seen in how they react to the small family problems of every-day living, the solutions that they have already tried, and what style they use to deal with the tasks that we give them as part of the family therapy process. By validating that cooperation is inevitable and that there are many styles of cooperation, which are both defiance based as well as compliance based, we are able to help the family determine their own style and help them adjust it to the demands

of the school and the community. This tends to normalize and diffuse alienation and anger toward the "system". Finally we help the families get in touch with those parts of their family history that are success based rather than failure based in order that they can be more comfortable in sustaining successful problem solving behavior.

Summary and Conclusions

This article has presented some of the authors' experience with a program utilizing family therapy as the primary intervention into the problems of school truancy. Preliminary follow-up has allowed us to conclude that it is a successful program in that the majority of children who were defined as truant do return to school for the academic year, stay in school until legal age for leaving, and stay out of the court system. Many actually do finish school either by graduating or obtaining a high school equivalency certificate. There have also been many spin-off values from this program. Court service workers, school personnel and welfare workers have become more sympathetic and respectful of families involved in the truancy program. Since workable alternatives are now available, school personnel are more inclined to deal immediately with truancy issues in a flexible, respectful, but forceful way since students know that missing school for unexcused reasons will not be tolerated, the number of students choosing to be truant has decreased in our community.

TRUANCY DIVERSIONARY COUNSELING PROGRAM

PITTSBURG STATE UNIVERSITY, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY AND COUNSELING
ELEVENTH DISTRICT JUDICIAL DIVISION
PITTSBURG AREA OFFICE OF S.R.S.
U.S.D. 250

I. Goals of the Program

A. To promote the growth of students educationally, emotionally, and socially.

B. To increase students' self-awareness and self-affirmation.

C. To reduce anxiety-producing situations for the group by giving information and correcting misconceptions.

D. To assist students and their parents in developing positive attitudes toward the school and to assist the school in maintaining positive attitudes toward these students.

E. To encourage students to take advantage of the opportunities, both academic and extracurricular, offered by the school.

II. Procedures

A. Truant students are reported by school officials to the county attorney's office.

B. County attorney's office files a petition for child in need of care.

C. Child placed on informal supervision pursuant to statute with the condition of informal supervision being successful participation in the program.

D. Court services officer notifies program director.

E. Program director or his designated assistant contacts the family, describes the program, and initiates counseling.

F. Counseling will continue for up to six months on an as-needed basis determined by Dr. Robert Sheverbush and practicum students. Dr. Sheverbush and student counselors will deem the proper method of feedback to court services. Failure to attend counseling sessions and participate actively in treatment program will be reported immediately to court services with the understanding that the treatment program will be terminated or revised for that individual.

G. Court services will request the County Attorney to file application for revocation of informal supervision.

III. Role of the County Attorney's Office

The role of the County Attorney's Office in this program is one of initial determination. That is, it is the County Attorney's Office who decides whether or not the program will be offered to the truant.

Before making this determination, the County Attorney will receive input from school officials who are more familiar with the truant's history. This input is usually in letter form received from the vice-principal in charge of attendance and discipline. However, the County Attorney may also discuss the matter with school counselors and others who may be able to provide valuable information in order to make a more informed decision.

Once there has been a determination that the truant would benefit from the program, the County Attorney will file a Child in Need of Care Petition, pursuant to K.S.A. 38-1501, et seq., on the basis of truancy. The Petition will be accompanied with a letter to the Clerk of the Court stating that the County Attorney will be recommending informal supervision under the provisions of K.S.A. 38-1544. The matter will then be set for first appearance on the juvenile docket.

At the first appearance, the State will recommend informal supervision for a period of six (6) months with the condition that the truant successfully complete the Truancy Prevention and Diversion Program. If the Court follows the recommendation, the matter will be referred to the Court Service Officer for an initial interview.

After the initial interview is completed, the Court Service Officer will set up an intake meeting with the following persons in attendance: The County Attorney, the truant, the truant's family, the counselor, the director of the program and a representative of the school. At this meeting all interested parties will sign the counseling agreement. The presence of school officials and representatives from the legal system is essential to show the truant the seriousness of his or her situation while lending support to the truant and his or her family.

The County Attorney's role is complete when the truant successfully finishes the program. If the truant fails to successfully finish the program, the County Attorney will then file a motion with the Court asking the Court to revoke the informal supervision and declare the truant to be a Child in Need of Care.

IV. Role of the Department of Psychology and Counseling

The Department of Psychology and Counseling at Pittsburg State University is excited about the possibility of entering into an agreement with the County Attorney, the schools, the court system, etc. to set up a cooperative truancy diversional program. This program would work with students and their families who are referred from the county attorney's office for up to six (6) months of counseling and group work. All or some of the following types of treatment will be provided: 1) counseling with the students and their families, 2) group counseling and skill building with students, 3) diagnostic workups where necessary, 4) referral to other support personnel where necessary and appropriate, such as reading specialists, learning disabilities specialists, etc.

The program will be coordinated at Pittsburg State by Dr. Robert L. Sheverbush with the assistance of a graduate assistant for twenty hours per week during the nine months school year from September through May. Actual counseling will be done by advanced graduate students in the Psychology and Counseling program. Additional tutoring and support may be provided by undergraduate psychology majors. Clinical facilities will be obtained and remodeled in Shirk Hall in addition to those already available in Hughes Hall. Close consultation will be maintained with the schools. It is hoped that school counselors will be able to participate as cotherapists in situations where it seems appropriate. The director of the program for the University will provide feedback to the court concerning progress of the truant students and their families and will also reserve the right to refer families and individual students who are not cooperative back to the court.

The program can be implemented as early as September 1987. The University will be able to provide up to ten (10) slots at any given time. The cost for the nine-month program will be $18,500. Since this is a pilot program, some of these costs may be borne by the University during the first year. It will be important to evaluate, change and/or modify it where necessary as the year progresses. A decision to continue the program for the summer and for the 1988-89 school year should be made in early 1988.

All administrative officials at the University, including President Wilson, have been made aware of these negotiations and are in favor of them in principle. Some questions which must be answered include: 1) what types of reports and other paperwork will be required by the court? 2) What liability issues are involved? 3) What procedures for prompt, efficient referral can be developed? 4) What procedures for reentry into the school system, particularly with some hope of receiving credit, need to be instituted?

V. Role of Schools

A. Principal and Assistant Principal (Middle School emphasis to begin with)

Monitor attendance.

Notify school counselors of students with three consecutive unexcused absences or five unexcused absences in a semester.

Notify parents by phone if possible.

Send truancy letter to parents by certified mail. The letter will contain information on the compulsory education law and the diversion program.

Notify the Pittsburg State University diversion coordinator by phone.

Notify the Assistant County Attorney, Jeff Larson, of the truant's name, birthdate, address, phone number, and parent or guardian.

Attend Monday evening intake meetings with a Pittsburg State University counselor, school counselor, and the assistant county attorney.

Investigate the possibility of assisting with the funding for a graduate assistant at Pittsburg State University to coordinate the diversion program. Other funding possibilities are the city, county, social and rehabilitational services, and the college. A half time graduate assistant would earn $2,600 per year and a full time graduate assistant would earn $5,200.

B. Teachers

Inform principals of students absent three consecutive days or five days in a semester.

C. Counselors

Notify parents of student absences after three consecutive days or five days in a semester.

Set up counseling sessions with students.

Attend co-counseling sessions at Pittsburg State University for diversion program

Attend intake meetings with principal, assistant county attorney, and Pittsburg State University diversion coordinator.

D. Skipping School - Principal and Assistant Principal

Notify parents

Notify school counselors

Notify Pittsburg State University diversion director

Assign the student to attend counseling sessions at Pittsburg State University in lieu of suspension

VI. Role of the Pittsburg Area Office of S.R.S.

Where truants or potential truants are under the jurisdiction of S.R.S., the same procedures will be followed as with other students. However, the S.R.S. case worker will be a part of the Truancy Diversionary team and will participate in the opening conference for the case. Periodic reports concerning the program of the truant student and their families will be provided to the S.R.S. case worker. Upon some occasions, the case worker will also be asked to participate in the family therapy program.

TRUANCY DIVERSION COUNSELING CONTRACT

_____ hereby states and affirms that he is the Principal/Assistant Principa. for _____ School and has reported to the Crawford County Attorney's office that

_____ is truant as defined by the laws of Kansas. This truancy is evidenced by the following unexcused absences: _____ ; Part days _____.

_____ hereby states and affirms that he has filed a petition in the District court of Crawford County asking the Court to find _____ is a Child in Need of Care as defined by K.S.A. 38-1502. The basis of the Petition is truancy as defined by K.S.A. 72-1113.

_____ further states that he has discussed this matter with the Court Services Office. _____ and Dr. Sheverbush. the coordinator of the Truancy Diversion Counseling Program. All of the above parties have agreed to offer this program to the _____ family.

_____. the parents of _____. hereby agree to actively participate in the program and fully cooperate with the counselors. Participation and cooperation includes. but is not limited to. attendance of all family members at all scheduled sessions as requested by Dr. Sheverbush. being prompt in arriving for each appointment and complying with any and all other conditions set by the Court Services Officer and the family's counselor. This participation shall continue until the family : released from the program by Dr. Sheverbush. Failure to attend a single session could result in termination of informal supervision and removal of the child from the home.

_____ hereby agrees to actively participate in the program and fully cooperate with the counselors. Participation and cooperation includes. but is not limite. to. attendance of all family members at all scheduled sessions as requested by Dr. Shevérbush. being prompt in arriving for each appointment and complying with any and all

other conditions set by the Court Services Officer and the family's counselor. This participation and cooperation shall continue until the family is released from the program by Dr. Sheverbush. Failure to attend a single session could result in termination of informal supervision and removal of the said child from the home.

The _____ family hereby agrees to pay a $35 fee for participation in the counseling program.

In exchange for the family's participation, the County Attorney's office agrees not to pursue other remedies provided by law including removal of the child from the home. The County Attorney's office further agrees to refrain from terminating the period of informal supervision as long as the family is attending scheduled sessions and meeting all other conditions set by the Court or Court Services Office.

The Court Services Office agrees to monitor school attendance and progress in the counseling program.

_____, Principal/Assistant Principal, agrees to cooperate in the program by providing support for the child at school and by monitoring school attendance.

Dr. Sheverbush, director of Truancy Diversion counseling program, agrees to supervise the program and inform the Court Services Office of progress or lack of progress being made by the family in the program.

After successful completion of the program and with the recommendation of Dr. Sheverbush, the county Attorney's office will recommend to the Court termination of informal supervision and release of the truant from the court's jurisdiction provided the family has complied with all other conditions of informal supervision.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, The parties have hereunto set their hands;

Date: _____ _____

Parent

Date: _____ _____

Parent

Date: _____ _____

Child

Date: _____ _____

Sibling

Date: _____ _____

Sibling

Date: _____ _____

School Official

Date: _____ _____

Court Service Office

Date: _____ _____

County Attorney's Office

Date: _____ _____

Program Director or designee